

Alternate Perspectives on a Split-Second of Violence

by Laura of Maychoria

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Summary: Ficlets, drabbles, and missing scenes from "A Split-Second of Violence." Chapter 2: Yachi can't quite understand what just happened to Hinata. But she will do what she can for the team, even so.

1. Chapter 1

I keep having ideas for scenes that won't work with the main story, since it's being written entirely from Kageyama's perspective. This one is angsty but others will be justâ€|so much fluff. Next one will probably be Tsukishima angrily fighting the urge to give Hinata a gift.

* * *

><p>She held it in until much, much later. Shouyou was asleep. Granny had taken Natsu home. The hospital was quiet and dark and deep and still. Those sweet boys were long gone, leaving behind their good wishes, their gentle touches and heartfelt words. The nurse hadn't been by in a while. The doctors had changed shifts.<p>

She bent over in the armchair, her stomach erupting in knots and coils of liquid fire. It rose inside her like smoke in a chimney, stinging, burning, aching, filling her throat with ashes and her eyes with tears. The first sob was quiet, escaping through frantic fingers pressed to her mouth. Then another slithered out, and another, until she was crying desperately, soft and low and choked. She didn't understand. She didn't understand.

"Shh, shh." He came, warm hands, the hands she had always loved, wrapping around her shoulders, trying to rub stillness into her shaking bones. "Don't cry, don't cry."

"I can'tâ€|stop," she said between sobs, doing everything she could to muffle them. Both hands pressed over her face now, trying to force

it all back in again. It wouldn't go. It was too big, and it hurt too much. She had been stronger earlier, when her son was awake, when her children needed her. She couldn't be strong anymore.

"Shhhh. Shhh, now." He slid into the chair next to her, awkwardly—they were no longer teenagers, and his hip pressed painfully into her side, and she knew it had to be as uncomfortable for him as it was for her. But he wrapped himself around her and held her still, lending his strength, and she curled into his chest and tried to stop shaking.

"How could anyone do this?" she asked. "How could anyone do this to our little boy?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know. Please, you must stop crying."

Don't tell me what to do, she wanted to say. Don't you know that sometimes a mother must weep over her child?

But all that would come out was the same question again. "How could anyone do this?"

Shouyou, her sunflower child, her brilliant shining boy. Who would hurt him? Who would dare? Only someone who believed himself the master of this world, above all judgement, all shame. Only someone who cared for nothing, who knew nothing, who saw only darkness in his eyes. The light of her son must have hurt in that darkness, too bright, too piercing. Perhaps that was why the monster had felt a need to snuff it out.

"Shh," he kept saying, low and sweet and soothing. "It will be all right."

He would cry later, she knew. Alone, in the shower as water ran around him or in the kitchen over his tea. He had always been good at showing a face of only cheer to the world. It was one of the things she loved about him, that indomitable heart. He was strong when she could not be. Later, perhaps, she would be strong for him. But not right now. Not right now.

"How could anyone do this?"

He had no answer. After a time, perhaps a long time, they both quieted. They listened to the silence, to the soft breaths of their son sleeping in the hospital bed, steady and labored. It was the only kind of peace they could find right now, so they accepted it, and were still.

2. Chapter 2

He blamed Yamaguchi for putting the idea in his head.

It had begun innocently enough. They went with the team to visit Hinata in the hospital. It was only proper. (And Tsukishima could admit, if only to himself, that it would be reassuring to see Hinata looking alive and well. The brief glance in on him the first night had done little to erase the images that had filled his mind since the attack.) It had not been an altogether satisfying visit, since

Hinata persisted in falling asleep every few minutes, no matter what was going on. It was annoying as hell. Tsukishima didn't care how many times the upperclassman giggled when it happened. They could think it was cute all they wanted, but that didn't mean it was.

During one of Hinata's brief naps, Yamaguchi had nudged Tsukishima's side and pointed at the table by the hospital bed. "Aw, someone bought Hinata a teddy bear." Tsukishima recognized it from the gift shop downstairs, which Yachi and Shimizu had dragged them all through before they came up, in case anyone wanted to buy a card or a balloon for their injured teammate.

There had been a display of those bears, all in various colors with a heart on the stomach with "Get Well Soon!" inscribed inside. This one was black with an orange heart. Karasuno colors. Tsukishima was sure Hinata would like it, once he was awake long enough to notice it.

Hinata's mother was standing nearby, and she nodded sweetly when Yamaguchi pointed out the bear. "Isn't that a kind gift? A number of visitors have noticed it, and we've been getting a few other stuffed animals. I'll give them to Shouyou when he's awake enough to appreciate them. He might be a little old for plush toys, but I suppose people think they're more appropriate than flowers and more long-lasting than balloons, so if they want to give a little more, that's the way to go."

Yamaguchi grinned, appreciating the joke. "Wouldn't it be funny if he ended up with a pile of stuffed animals? What would he even do with them?"

Mrs. Hinata laughed. "Probably dump them all in his bed and sleep on them. That boy does like his cushions and pillows."

Yamaguchi giggled. He looked to Tsukishima, eyes sparkling. "We could pool our money and get him one. What do you think, Tsukki?"

Tsukishima shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous. I bought a card. That's enough."

Yamaguchi shrugged and let the matter drop. But now Tsukishima couldn't stop thinking about it. It was such a stupid idea, but it wouldn't leave him alone.

He tapped his pencil on the homework page he was supposed to be working on, then stood up from the desk and stomped over to his closet. Again. For the fifth time. He opened the door and stared up at the top shelf. The head of his old Stego-chan peeked out at him over the edge of the shelf, fuzzy and olive-green.

Tsukishima slammed the door and went back to the desk. Sat down. Tapped his pencil on the paper.

Stego-chan had been a gift from Akiteru when he was five. It had been stuck in his closet for years now. But it still had sentimental value, like the dinosaur figures on the shelves above his desk. Even though he had forgotten all about it until Yamaguchi made that dumb comment about giving Hinata a stuffed animal.

Tsukishima sighed and leaned back in his chair, staring up at the wall. On the top shelf above his desk were books he never looked at anymore, picture books from the same period in his life as Stego-chan. He used to pore over them constantly, but now he had better, more complete books, as well as the bounty of the internet and the educational assets of his well-stocked school. He didn't really need those, either, just like he didn't really need a stuffed dinosaur that had been gathering dust in his closet for years.

They weren't of any use to anyone, stuck in Tsukishima's room doing nothing. They were just detritus now, remnants of childish passions now matured into ordinary hobbies he could take or leave as he chose. They were just things. They didn't matter.

People mattered. What happened to Hinata mattered. Tsukishima could pretend that it wasn't a big deal, that he hadn't been troubledâ€”sickened, in factâ€”by what had been done to his teammate. But he knew better, here in the oasis of his own room, surrounded by the possessions and hobbies that brought him peace and listening to quiet music that drowned out the roar of the world.

His mother had a saying. She said that the world was not always a place of goodness and righteousness, much as they wished it to be. Sometimes, evil people committed wicked acts and filled the world with darkness. When that happened, it was the duty of just people to do as many kind deeds as they could, to shine a light and drive out the darkness wherever they found it. It was a never-ending battle, and sometimes it seemed like that light could never win. And maybe it couldn't, but that didn't mean that the battle wasn't worth fighting.

Tsukishima put down his pencil and went to his closet. He pulled down Stego-chan and patted him over, looking for dust. There didn't seem to be any, unlike his morbid musings.

A step to the desk shelves, and he pulled down one of the old picture books, as well, the one about sharks. The Lucifer Dogfish was on page twenty-threeâ€”he remembered it clearly. Such a fascinating creature. It had always stuck in his mind. He tucked Stego-chan under his arm and flipped through the book, appreciating the pictures one last time.

He set the book on his desk and placed the stuffed stegosaurus on top, then went looking for wrapping paper. His mom was the kind to carefully open presents at the seams and tuck the paper away, and he had once been the same way, having picked the habit up from her. Nowadays that seemed stupidâ€”What did wrapping paper cost? A few dozen yen? Why waste so much effort on it?â€”but he knew he still had some old paper somewhere.

There, in the bottom drawer of his dresser. It was light blue with multicolored balloons and confetti. Tsukishima touched it gently, almost stroking his fingers over it, trying to remember where it had come from. A birthday, probably, but which one? Perhaps Stego-chan himself had come to him wrapped in this paper.

He set the paper on the desk by the stegosaurus and the book, and then he sat in his chair and stared at them.

This was such a stupid idea. Damn that Yamaguchi for putting it in his head. Who cared if he gave Hinata a stuffed animal? No one. Not even the captain would expect something like this from him. And what would Hinata do with it if he gave it to him? Pile it in his bed with the other stuffed animals and sleep on top of them? That was the stupidest thing Tsukishima had ever heard.

(And poor Stego-chan, anyway, being slept on top of by the most hyperactive teenager in all of Japan. Tsukishima was willing to bet that Hinata was the type to kick all his covers off the bed and end up sleeping upside down by morning. What a cruel thing to do to a faithful old friend, to give him away to someone like that.)

But no. They were just things. Honestly, Tsukishima would be better off if he threw away most of the stuff he wasn't using. He held onto a lot of things that weren't doing him any good, mostly because it took less effort to let them stay than to pack them up and get rid of them.

Hinata was annoying and over-enthusiastic. He'd gotten on Tsukishima's nerves in a thousand ways from the moment they met. But Tsukishima wasn't so stupid that he couldn't see that Hinata was a good person, for all that. An evil person had done something terrible to him, spilling darkness all around like a pool of ink. It was the duty of the righteous to commit acts of kindness to battle that darkness, to push it back and banish it, even a little at a time.

Giving Hinata a stuffed animal and a book was a silly, stupid thing to do. But it was kind. Maybe Hinata would appreciate it. Maybe not. Either way, Tsukishima would have done his duty, and gotten rid of some stuff he didn't need in the process.

Tsukishima nodded firmly to himself, decision made. He stood up from the desk and went looking for cellophane tape.

It wasn't until the next day, when Yamaguchi saw the big, squishy present in his hands and immediately burst into laughter, that Tsukishima remembered that Hinata wasn't the only annoying person he would have to contend with on this stupid quest he'd set for himself. He sighed heavily, face heating up, but refused to back down. He was going to do something kind, dammit, even if it killed him.

"Shut up, Yamaguchi."

"Sorry, Tsukki."

Yamaguchi covered his mouth with his hand to stifle the rest of it, but he couldn't quite keep it in. Tsukishima narrowed his eyes and stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him.

He was already regretting this so, so

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****AN:**** So I've noticed that in the anime and the manga, Yamaguchi giggles a lot when he's around Tsukki. Not so much with other people, but with Tsukishima, all the time. Sometimes he's giggling at the mean things Tsukki says, but just as often it seems like he's just laughing at Tsukki himself. I have a theory that this is

because Yamaguchi has known Tsukki for so long that he can see through all of his shit. So when Tsukki starts throwing shade and acting like an asshole, all Yamaguchi can do is laugh at him, like, "Oh, you dork, I know who you really are. You're such a poser." And Tsukki tells him to shut up because he hates being called out, and Yamaguchi apologizes reflexively (ALWAYS with that little giggle in his voice), just because it makes his friend feel a little better about being such an enormous loser nerd baby.

I have at least one more missing scene that I absolutely must write (more Tanaka and Natsu, YES, must be done, their initial meeting must be explored), and I'll probably come up with more. If you have a question or missing scene or an alternate perspective you'd like to see, feel free to let me knowâ€"comment, review, ask on tumblr, whatever. It might spark something. I will continue to do my best to post a new chapter of the main story every Monday and Thursday (that schedule seems to be working pretty well for me so far).

3. Chapter 3

****AN:**** I will be writing more Natsu and Tanaka, but I had to get this out first.

* * *

><p>Suga kept himself together until it was all over. Until the crisis had passed, until everyone had gotten to look in on Hinata and reassure themselves that he was alive, that he was safe, that he would heal. Takeda-sensei was taking some of the younger teammates home in his car, and Tanaka Saeko was doing the same for her brother and a few others. There weren't many of them left, milling around the hospital lobby a bit at a loss, looking at bus schedules or calling their parents.<p>

When Suga disappeared from the group, Daichi noticed. He'd been waiting for this to happen, and he was pretty sure he knew where to go. Suga was the team's rock, steady and reliable, always a calm and reassuring presence. He wouldn't want anyone to see him any other way. No one really did, except Daichi, and even he had to keep a sharp eye out to catch it when it happened.

But today... Yeah, today was a day like that. There was no broken broom, no missing teammate, but it was a day of shattering all the same.

Daichi walked into the men's room and let the door shut behind him. It was the only private place close enoughâ€"Suga hadn't been gone for long. He walked quietly down the row of shiny metal stalls, keeping an eye on the gap beneath each door. "Suga? I know you're in here."

He heard a catching of breath, a squeak of a gym shoe on the tiled floor. The end of the rowâ€"the handicapped stall. The door was locked. Daichi laid his hand flat against it and bent down to look beneath the door. Suga was sitting on the floor in the corner, his feet pulled up tightly to his body. That was all Daichi could see, but it was enough.

He straightened and thumped his hand gently on the door. "Let me in,

Suga."

"Don't be ridiculous," Suga said, trying to hide the strain in his voice. "This is the bathroom."

"You're not on the toilet. I know why you're here. You'd better not be blaming yourself for this, you idiot."

Suga released a short laugh, broken in the middle. "No. I think Tanaka and Kageyama have that covered."

Daichi paused. Maybe he didn't know what was troubling Suga, after all. He was used to his friend and co-leader overthinking things, taking on too much responsibility and then bearing the weight of failures that did not belong to him. Maybe this was something different.

"You're...not?" he asked cautiously, needing confirmation.

Suga's feet shifted restlessly on the hard floor. "No. Not...much."

Daichi sighed and rested his forehead against the cool door. It felt kind of nice. "Please come out and talk to me."

"Don't wanna." Suga's voice held a sullen note that might have been funny in different circumstances.

"I'm not going to go away. You might as well come out and talk to me face to face."

"There's nothing to talk about." Yet Suga's voice wavered, all the same. "I know it wasn't my fault, that it wasn't anyone's fault but the person who did this. I know how to deal with trauma like thisâ€"you know I do, you know almost everything there is to know about me. I just...want to be alone."

Daichi leaned his head more heavily against the door, closing his eyes for moment. Yes, he knew Suga was equipped to deal with a day like today, but still... "I don't want you to do it alone, idiot. Is that so hard to understand? Come on. Unlock the door."

Knowing and doing were two different things. Yes, Suga had the theory. He had assisted others. It was kind of what Suga did: assisting others. But had he ever had to deal with something like this for himself? Daichi didn't know. He rather hoped not. And that meant that Suga shouldn't be alone, not until Daichi was sure.

After a moment of heavy silence, Daichi heard Suga drag himself to his feet. The lock on the door turned, and Daichi took a step back as the metal slab swung open. Suga stood there, still holding the door with one hand, looking at Daichi straight-on. His eyes were a little red, but Daichi didn't see any tears. His expression, though...

He looked as upset and unhappy as Daichi had ever seen him. Suga nearly always had a smile, even when he was in painâ€"it was his way of trying to comfort everyone around him, to lift them up and share their burdens. He had no smile now, not even a strained, uncomfortable one.

Well, at least he wasn't trying to hide his distress from Daichi. That was something.

Daichi snagged Suga's shoulder and dragged him out. "Come here." And he wrapped his arms around him and held on tight.

Suga froze for an instant, but responded quickly, wrapping his arms around Daichi in return and ducking his face against his shoulder. He trembled, just a little, just once. Daichi pressed his cheek to his temple. "Okay. Talk to me."

Suga nodded, then disengaged and stepped back enough to get some space. Daichi let him go, but held onto his shoulders, unwilling to lose all contact. He watched Suga's face carefully.

"I just..." Suga's gaze shifted, down and away. "I just... I'm scared."

"Of what?" Daichi barely even blinked, he was watching him so closely.

Suga met his eyes, then glanced away again. "I don't want... I don't want to lose anyone on the team."

"You won't," Daichi said with great confidence. He was sure of this, because he was going to make it true.

"I don't mean Hinata. I mean... Yes, he's been badly hurt, and he'll need time to recover, but I know we can get through it. I mean... Kageyama. And Tanaka, a little, but mostly Kageyama."

Daichi's forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"He's been...so quiet. Since it happened." Suga rubbed a hand over his face. "I see it happening, and it... It reminds me of..."

Oh. Daichi swallowed, and squeezed his shoulders a little tighter. "Your friend in junior high."

Suga met his eyes frankly. "I don't want him to get lost in the darkness. He's so... He's so young. In many ways, I think he's even less mature than my friend was when that happened to her, and I don't know... I don't know if he'll be able to handle this, if he'll be able to keep from getting lost in it all. So I'm scared."

"And you're scared that you might not be able to stop it. To stop this from happening to another person you care about."

Suga held still for a moment, his chin wobbling, then nodded.

"Okay." Daichi pulled him for another hug, unable to stop himself. "Okay. First off, you're amazing, Sugawara Koushi. You will not let that happen."

Suga laughed into his shoulder, wet and broken, but more like himself. "So confident," he murmured.

"Confident in you," Daichi said, squeezing tight. "And second off, the rest of us are behind you. If you need me to smack some sense

into Kageyama or sit on him so you can talk to him, just let me know."

Suga snorted. He might have left some snot on Daichi's shoulder. Daichi didn't care. "We could maybe try the gentle approach first."

Daichi was willing to accede to this point, at least for a while. "Sure. I know he's an idiot and it takes him some time to get things. But if it goes on too long, let me know and I'll step in."

"Okay."

Once again, Daichi held on until Suga broke the embrace first. This time Suga stepped back and immediately wiped his face, getting rid of any evidence. Daichi stood there quietly and let him do what he needed to do.

"We're going to be all right," Daichi told him, because he wanted to make sure he knew. "All of us."

Suga nodded, sure and strong. The rock of Karasuno, firm and steady once again. "I know. We'll make it be true."

"That's right."

And they walked back to the lobby to be with their team.

4. Chapter 4

"Are you sure this is all right?" Tanaka asked, nervously pulling his shoes off one at a time. "I know it's early, and I don't want to intrude..." He had called first, of course, he wasn't completely without etiquette, and she had said it was fine, but still...

Mrs. Hinata waved a hand. "Of course, of course! We're glad to have you, Tanaka-kun. I was afraid Shouyou would be bored with nothing to do and only Nacchan and me to talk to, so I'm very glad you decided to visit. It's so kind of you to sacrifice your time like this."

Tanaka shrugged, embarrassed, as he slipped out of his jacket and hung it up. "It's no sacrifice, really. I'd be a little bored, too, without anything to do..."

He repressed a sigh. Ever since elementary school, it seemed, he'd been taken for a delinquent by all the authority figures in his life, or at least someone with the potential to be one. But he'd never actually been suspended before, nor even censured. It was all very new to him, and though (as Saeko had made it clear) it had been for a good cause, it was still humiliating to know that some people had a reason to think badly of him now, had justification and proof for the way they had always seen him.

But Mrs. Hinata patted his shoulder, her face radiating kindness, and tugged him further into the house. "Come, I'll show you to the main room. Make yourself at home, won't you? You are welcome here for as long as you'd like to stay."

Tanaka followed behind her, trying to walk quietly on the wooden floor and not thunder like a herd of elephants as he usually did. Hinata's house was really nice, all full of air and sunlight, but with enough nicks and scratches to show that it was lived-in and comfortable. His parents were wonderful people, too, and his little sister...

Tanaka froze. He saw a little mop of bright hair at the end of the hall, peeking out from a bedroom door to spy on him. The twin pigtailed and chubby little cheeks (not to mention the much reduced height) told him that this was Natsu, not his teammate. He only saw her for a moment, though, before she spotted him looking back in return and ducked into the room, hidden away from his sight.

Mrs. Hinata walked on, seeming not to notice, and after a second for his brain to catch up, Tanaka hurried after her. Mrs. Hinata leaned in a large doorway, waving Tanaka to move up beside her. "Shouyou, you have a visitor!"

At Tanaka's entrance, Hinata looked up from where he sat on the sofa, apparently engrossed with something on his lap. A tired smile slowly spread across his face, but Tanaka's heart still ached at the weariness there, the big bruise on his forehead, the listless way he slumped against the cushions behind him.

"Good morning, Tanaka-senpai!" Still, his voice was as cheerful as ever. "It's good to see you!"

"Hey, Hinata." Tanaka moved over to the sofa to sit next to him. Mrs. Hinata gave them both a wave of farewell and disappeared down the hall. Tanaka squinted at the thing in Hinata's lap. "Whatcha got there?"

"Ah, Natsu gave me one of her coloring books." Hinata smoothed his palm over the black-and-white page. He held a crayon in one hand, and as Tanaka watched, he pushed it to the page again, rubbing back and forth in a most unenthusiastic way.

Tanaka tilted his head, not sure what he was looking at. "Oi, Hinata," he said slowly, not wanting to be insulting but feeling that this was something that needed to be pointed out, "I think you're coloring that dog pink."

Hinata nodded. "Yep. It's a pink dog."

Tanaka watched quietly for another minute or two. "Why?"

Hinata turned his head to look him in the eye. He managed a smile, but it reminded Tanaka a little too much of the queasy smile Hinata had given him on the bus that time. Right before he threw up all over Tanaka's jersey. "It's the crayon Natsu gave me."

"Okay." Tanaka came to a decision. "I think you might need a nap, little kouhai."

Hinata protested, but it was a very dull and desultory sort of protest. Tanaka gently tugged the coloring book and crayon out of his hands and set them on the floor, then nudged Hinata's shoulder until he toppled over into the pile of blankets and pillows already on the

sofa.

"Don't waaaaannnaaa," Hinata whined as Tanaka knelt next to him and started tugging on the blankets underneath him. He should have moved the blankets before he pushed Hinata over, he saw now. He'd never been great at thinking ahead. "I sleep too much. 'S embarrassing."

"You're injured," Tanaka said as reasonably as he could. "Of course you need a lot of sleep. Didn't the doctor tell you so?" He dragged out a corner of the blanket and pulled it over Hinata. Despite his words, Hinata had practically melted into the sofa, his entire body limp with exhaustion.

Hinata mumbled something. Tanaka almost felt his ear grow to catch the words. "What was that?"

"Yes." Hinata's voice was sullen, muffled in the bedding. "Kag'yama said so too."

"Kageyama's pretty smart. Sometimes it's a good idea to listen to him." Tanaka patted Hinata's back, now cushioned under several layers of fabric. "Hey, is this your stuffed stegosaurus? I'll make sure he stays close, right?"

He set the stegosaurus on the sofa arm above Hinata's head, watching over him, and patted it to make sure it would stay. Then he sat back on his heels, satisfied with a job well done. Hinata's dark-ringed eyes watched him from an opening in the pile of bedding that his small body had become, half-lidded but still awake. Tanaka gave him a smile.

"There, don't you feel cozy? You should have a nice long sleep, now."

Hinata blinked. His mouth opened, then closed again.

Tanaka raised his eyebrows. "What is it? Something else to say? Gonna tell me again that you're not tired? Cuz I know you are. I can smell lies."

Hinata shook his head slowly. A flush of pink spread over his cheeks. "Just wondering..."

"Yeah? You can ask me anything."

Hinata made a little noise and turned his head into the sofa. He mumbled something, but this time Tanaka couldn't hear it no matter how hard he tried.

"Wanna say that again?"

Hinata looked at him, his face now flame-bright. "... 'R you gonna be here when I wake up?"

Tanaka's heart squeezed in his chest. That was right, Noya had told him... Hinata was scared. He did everything he could to hide it, but Tanaka was pretty sure all of the third-years and most of the second-years knew. Kageyama probably knew, too, and that was why he was staying over tonight. (Suga had been keeping everyone up to date

on the changes in Hinata's schedule so they all knew when they should and shouldn't visit.)

Now, Tanaka swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. His voice came out in a rough murmur. "Yeah. I'll be here. I'll be here all day. I promise."

Until they kicked him out or Kageyama took over.

"Okay." Hinata's eyes slid shut immediately, as if that was all he had needed to know that he could rest.

Tanaka watched him for a moment, just appreciating the ability to look at his kouhai, to be able to see his body move with his breath, his eyelashes fluttering on his cheek. Eventually that got to be too embarrassing, though, so he turned and sat on the floor with his back to the sofa, his hands resting on his knees.

"What now?" he muttered to himself. He planned to stay here and keep his promise, but he really wasn't great at sitting still. Was there something else he could do to be helpful to Hinata and his family? He glanced at the coloring book and crayon on the floor beside him, then shook his head. That was for Hinata. And besides, he would need more than just one pink crayon.

"You should play with Natsu," Hinata said, his voice quiet but clear.

Tanaka started and looked over his shoulder at his face. Hinata's eyes were still closed and his body was still. "Waahh, I thought you were asleep."

"Almost." Hinata heaved a great yawn, his pink tongue showing for a moment, then settled even deeper down into the sofa. "Play with Natsu. She's been pestering me even though Mom told her to leave me alone. She doesn't get why I can't play with her since I'm home from school and everything."

"Eeh, that's an idea, I suppose." Tanaka looked forward again. "I'm not sure it will work, though."

"Mmmwhy not?" Hinata's voice was getting sleepier and more slurred by the second.

Tanaka didn't speak for a moment, working up the words. Yet another thing that embarrassed him to talk about. "Uhhh, well, kids don't tend to like me very much."

"Why not?" Hinata almost sounded offended on his behalf, through the thick layer of sleep that muffled him. "You're such a great guy, why wouldn't they?"

Tanaka rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess I'm...kinda scary-looking? One time I called out to this first-year girl who looked lost, just 'cause I wanted to help her, and she started crying. I felt really bad."

Hinata giggled muzzily into his blanket. "That's dumb. They're idiots for being scared of you. You're pretty much the nicest senpai ever."

Tanaka snorted. Hinata was so sweet sometimes. Why would anyone want to hurt him? He clenched his fist over his chest, fighting away the sudden grief that engulfed him. He'd already fought these feelings again and again, ever since Hinata had gotten hurt. They never seemed to vanish completely.

"You'd better not tell Noya that," he said eventually, forcing cheer. "He thinks he's your favorite senpai."

"You're all my favorite," Hinata mumbled. He sounded closer to sleep than ever. Tanaka felt bad for keeping him up with his silly concerns. "Anyway, Natsu's easy. Just give her a piggyback ride and she'll be your friend forever."

"You really think so?"

"For sure. She acts shy and stuff, but she's really not. Once she decides you're a good playmate, she'll never leave you alone. Warning you now because once you're in, that's it. She'll use you as a jungle gym forever."

"I'm okay with that." Tanaka sat up straight, suddenly determined. "Okay, sleepy-chan, you go ahead and nap now. I've got everything covered."

"Kaaay."

Tanaka glanced over his shoulder to see his face again, but Hinata looked the same as before, utterly still, face completely blank. This time, though, it seemed like he was really asleep.

He started to turn his head back to face front again, then paused. A mop of bright hair had appeared in his peripheral vision. Natsu was peeking at him from the doorway.

Tanaka considered. Then he scooted sideways along the floor and picked up the coloring book and crayon. He held them up in front of his face and peered at them with narrowed eyes, as if he had never seen such arcane and mystical objects before in his life.

"Hah, I wonder what these things could be," he said loudly. He held the book sideways by one cover, letting it fall open, pages flapping in front of his face. "There appear to be strange images inside this thing. What could be the purpose of such a weird and uncanny artifact?"

He held up the pink crayon in his other hand, holding it far apart, and looked between it and the book several times, contorting his face into various expressions of fear, doubt, confusion, and idiocy. "Perhaps these things are meant to be used together? But how!"

He slowly brought the crayon toward the book and mashed it purposelessly against a random page. "It doesn't seem to be doing anything!" he cried in distress. "I'm such an idiot! I don't know how to make it work!"

That did the trick. A burst of childish giggles pealed through the air, and he heard the distinct thumps of a small body hitting on the floor in the hall, then moving around in a proxysm of joy. Tanaka had

succeeded in making a little girl roll on the floor with laughter, instead of weep in fear at his voice.

Tanaka slowly climbed up to his knees and crawled toward the door, still holding the book and crayon, and peeked around the edge to where Natsu lay on the floor, kicking her heels against the wood. He widened his eyes as far as they would go. "Hello, mysterious child!" he cried in delight. "Can you help explain these amazing objects to me?" He held out the book and crayon with an expression of extreme hopefulness.

Natsu leaped to her feet and grabbed them from his hands. "Yes! Silly nii-san! I'll show you! But we need more crayons!"

She raced off, and Tanaka sat back on his heels, grinning like the idiot he had pretended to be. He glanced at the sofa, hoping he hadn't woken Hinata with his foolery, but a soft snore assured him that all was well in that quarter.

Natsu returned with a box of crayons and several coloring books and flopped down on her stomach in the middle of the room, waving for Tanaka to join her. He lay down across from her, pointing and asking questions with wide eyes at everything she did. "Oh, you're supposed to put it flat on a hard surface? What a clever plan! I see, you are meant to press this colored stick against the paper with some strength? That works so much better than what I was doing! I am the most foolish of fools!"

Afterward, he offered her a piggyback ride. As Hinata had promised, that sealed the deal. He was "bald nii-san" forever, and he'd never been happier to accept a nickname in his life.

5. Chapter 5

The latest message on the group email was from Yamaguchi. Suga smiled when he saw it, and smiled harder when he opened the email and read it. Tsukishima and I will visit between four and five! That filled up Saturday, then, and the schedule was spread out enough to be supportive without being bothersome.

He started to type a reply, but paused when his phone began to ring. Suga leaned across his desk and snagged the phone from the pocket of his bookbag. His eyebrows rose when he saw the caller ID. It was Tanaka.

He blew out a small breath of relief as he accepted the call and put the phone to his ear. He'd been close to finally calling Daichi on his offer to sit on their kouhai if necessary to make him listen. They had both seen how badly Tanaka was doing, yesterday, and they'd just about had enough.

It was better that Tanaka had contacted Suga on his own, though. He didn't have to work at all to make his voice warm and cheerful in greeting. "Hello, Tanaka!"

"Hi, Suga-san." Tanaka's voice was a bit tentative, and there was a lot of noise behind him. It sounded like he was in a car with a window open and the radio playing. "We sure have some weird kouhai this year."

Suga grinned and rubbed a hand over his head. Not that he disagreed. At all. But this wasn't even close to what he'd been expecting for an opening statement. "Oh, yeah? Why do you say that?"

"Well, Kageyama just punched me in the arm and ordered me to call you. He also said a bunch of other weird things about wind and earthquakes and brains being allergic. I don't get it, Suga-san, I really don't."

Oh, now this was interesting. Suga stood and walked over to his window, looking out at the deep shades of the setting sun. "You saw Kageyama?"

"Yeah, at Hinata's house. I, uh, spent the day there. And Kageyama came over to spend the weekend. It's gonna be a busy place, I guess."

Suga hummed. He was very pleased to hear that Tanaka had taken it upon himself to visit Hinata. Hopefully the time had done him good—seeing Hinata resting and steadily getting better would surely soothe his heart. And Kageyama too! Suga couldn't stop smiling. With this news, he could let himself begin to believe that everything would be okay, eventually, that everyone would heal from this terrible experience.

"Any idea why Kageyama punched you?" he asked calmly, hiding all of this away. Tanaka was obviously still in some distress, and he had called for a reason. "I've never seen him strike a senpai before. He's usually much more polite."

"Eh, I guess I was saying things he didn't like. And he didn't believe me when I said I would call you after he told me to."

"Were you going to?"

Tanaka grunted. "Well, probably not."

Suga walked over to his bed and lay down on his back, staring at the ceiling. Kageyama had told Tanaka to call. So he had noticed that Tanaka was troubled, too, and had presumed that Suga would be able help. Kageyama was doing well enough to be able to look outside himself, notice another person hurting, and do his best to assist. These were all very good signs.

"Then I'm glad he punched you," Suga said. "You obviously needed to call me."

"So mean!" Tanaka muttered, but he didn't sound particularly upset. He sounded tired. And depressed. And a bit lost.

"Well, what can I do for you then?" Suga asked. It would be better if Tanaka could articulate his own troubles, even roughly.

"I don't know!" Tanaka's growl was a bit more spirited this time. "He just took my phone, found your contact, and told me to call you, then punched me when I didn't seem enthusiastic enough."

In the background, Tanaka's sister started loudly singing a pop song with the radio. Suga had to suppress a giggle. He didn't want Tanaka

to think he was laughing at him.

"Can you at least tell me what you were talking about at the time that prompted this unusual behavior from our polite first-year setter?"

Tanaka was silent for a good long stretch. Suga let him stew, lying quietly on his bed and staring at the ceiling. He scratched his head, rubbed his nose, and did his best not to interrupt whatever thought process was going through Tanaka's head.

"I...apologized to Hinata," Tanaka said at last, so quietly that it was difficult to hear him through the background noise.

Suga blinked. "For what?"

"For...not stopping it."

Suga's heart gave a sudden pang. He rolled over on his side and stared at the wall, propping his head on his folded arm. It hurt to hear Tanaka's voice like this, so quiet and downhearted. It wasn't like him. No wonder Kageyama had been disturbed.

"And what made you think that you needed to apologize?" Suga asked, his voice abruptly stern. This needed to be dealt with immediately.

"I'm Hinata's senpai." Tanaka's voice strengthened. He believed in this very strongly. "It's my job to look out for him and protect him. I failed."

"Is it also your job to control the tides? To change the weather so that every day is clear and sunny? To capture every evil person in Japan and put them in jail? Or perhaps the world? Is that how far your influence reaches?"

"I...what?" The confusion was enough to keep Tanaka from lowering his voice again. He sounded riled up, almost energetic. It was a vast improvement. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"As wonderful as you are at being a senpai, Tanaka, you are not a god. You are not all-knowing and you are not all-powerful. How could you have possibly stopped that horrible thing? How could you have possibly seen it coming? No one had the power to stop it. No one. It happened, it's done, and now we must deal with it. That's all. Blaming yourself accomplishes nothing. It only hurts you and does no good for Hinata."

Tanaka was silent for a long moment. "Is this what Kageyama meant when he started talking about earthquakes and wind?"

Suga chuckled and relaxed into his mattress, the tension running out of his body. "Perhaps, though I'm not the one who taught him to think like that. Maybe he was talking to someone else who gave him some very good words of wisdom."

Tanaka grunted. "He did say that I should talk to Take-chan, too."

"That might be it. Our sensei is quite wise for someone so

young."

Tanaka chuckled at that. "People might say the same about you."

"Maybe." The smile was coming back. Suga's heart felt much lighter than it had just fifteen minutes ago. Thank goodness Kageyama had made Tanaka call him.

"But what was that about brains being allergic? Do you understand that one?"

Suga laughed outright. He sat up and swung his legs over to sit on the edge of the bed, his free hand pressing down on the mattress beside him. "Yeah, that one might have come from me!"

They kept talking for the rest of Tanaka's car ride home, only stopping when Saeko's voice declared that they were home and it was Ryuu's turn to take out the trash. Then Tanaka ended the call, promising to call again if he needed to, and Suga believed him. It was with a light heart and sunny smile that he returned to the group email, only to find several more messages.

Tsukishima: _What, I never agreed to this. Don't drag me along._

Yamaguchi: _Would you rather go at a different time, then?_

Tsukishima: _I'd rather not go at all, thank you._

Yamaguchi: _I'm going between four and five. It's a long trip and I'd rather not make it alone._

Tsukishima: _Fine, I'll come with you._

Suga rolled his eyes, then finally finished typing the reply he had started earlier. He was glad that Tanaka, Kageyama, and Hinata were all on the mend from their various hurts. But Tanaka had been right: They had some really weird kouhai this year.

6. Chapter 6

He shouldn't have come to school on a Saturday. They weren't having weekend practice for obvious reasons, so there was no need for him to come. But somehow his morning jog had taken him here anyway, and now Daichi just had to stand here and tell himself that he shouldn't have done it. He shouldn't have to come to school on a Saturday. Now he was going to have to deal with this, and he didn't want to and he wasn't sure how and it was just... Damn it. It was too much.

They'd messed with the gym. _They'd messed with the gym._ It must have happened last night sometime, because everything was fine when the volleyball club finished practice yesterday around six in the afternoon. There had been other clubs and things going on when they left, so whoever had done this must have come in the middle of the night, like thieves, like criminals. That's what they were, criminals. The damned bastards had messed with their gym.

Daichi circled the building slowly, studying the damage. Plants were torn up, graffiti was everywhere and "oh, yeah" there were marks around the door to show that someone had tried to force it. The bastards had thrown rocks at the windows "he could see the little dings, though none of the glass had broken" and they'd even taken some sort of blunt object to the walls. It was ridiculous. It was stupid. It made no sense.

Worst were the words, though. Not only were they hostile and threatening and alarming as all get out, but the spelling was _atrocious_. Daichi had seen graffiti that looked like art, that looked like calligraphy, that looked like beauty spread across a once-ugly wall. This was not that. This was an attack, and it was awful, and it marred their gym, the place where they pursued the sport they loved and dreamed about being the best in Japan. Daichi wanted to tear his hair out, but all he did was stand there in his sweats, his fingernails biting into his palms, and tried to make his teeth unclench.

Eventually he calmed down enough to remember the phone in his pocket. His mom insisted that he take it with him everywhere, even on normal little exercise runs. She was a bit of a worrywart, and Daichi indulged her. He was glad now that he did. He needed to make a few calls.

First, the police. Daichi had never called the police before. It wasn't an emergency, so he called information first to get a non-emergency line, and then he had to convince the lady who picked up that he was serious, and then he had to explain it all, and it was exhausting and it was a pain and he hoped very much that he would never need to call the police again in his life. Then he called Takeda-sensei, who would know what to do about this and who needed to be contacted in the school. Then he called Suga.

"Suga, I need you to come to the school," he said bluntly as soon as his vice-captain picked up.

Suga was silent for perhaps a second. "You sound angry."

"That's because I am."

Suga was already moving on the other end, a rustling of cloth and a _swoosh_ of a door. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

"Just...just get here. I think I'm going to lose it if you don't."

"Don't do that!" Suga's voice was full of good humor, and that made Daichi calm down just a little more. "I'm on my way, I promise. Hold it together until I get there and we'll deal with whatever this is together, right?"

"Right."

Suga chuckled warmly and disconnected. Daichi lowered the phone and looked at it, grateful, once again, to have such a reliable co-leader. He was glad Suga hadn't insisted on an explanation or tried to guess what the problem was.

He didn't want to have to explain it again, not to Suga. Not to a teammate. Not to someone who was going to be just as shocked and wounded and angry as he was at this violation of their home away from home. It might have been selfish of him, but he didn't want to break this news to his friend. He'd rather that Suga find out when he arrived.

The police got there first, a single squad car with a pair of officers. One of them walked over to talk to Daichi while the other surveyed the damage. Daichi tried very hard to keep the scowl off his face while he talked to the man. Somehow he had expected more than this. Two or three cars, flashing lights and sirens, maybe a fire truck.

Or at least some show of _concern._ This police officer seemed bored, his voice slow and lazy as he asked a few perfunctory questions and made some random notes on a form. It took every ounce of restraint Daichi had to show the proper respect, to answer each question calmly and reasonably instead of grabbing the man by his head and forcing him to _look at the threats that had been made against his team._

"Do you have any idea who might have done this?" the police officer asked in a tone that told Daichi that he was expecting no response at all.

"Yes, I do," Daichi said fiercely. "I believe I know exactly who did it."

The officer's eyebrows rose. Maybe he finally had his attention.

Without waiting for further prompting, Daichi told him what was going on. How a third-year student had attacked one of his first-year teammates out of the blue, just grabbed him without warning and slammed him into a wall. How Hinata had been hospitalized for two days and wouldn't be back to school for a week, how cautious the doctors had been about the problems that could arise in the future. How Isao had shown no remorse, only laughed and sneered at their emotional responses to his horrible act. How the school had suspended him, and his friends had disliked the ruling.

"And there!" Daichi marched over toward the gym building, pointing, almost not caring if the officers were following him or listening to him anymore. He had to say this, had to half-yell about it, had to express somehow all of the feelings boiling inside him. "Look at that! Look under the window! _Next time will be worse._ What does that mean? Is that a death threat? Are they planning to _murder_ my kouhai?"

He was breathing hard, now, shaking all over. One of the police officers was trying to grab his attention, waving his hands in the air, his eyes wide. "Sawamura-kun. Sawamura-kun, you must calm down."

Daichi backed up abruptly, straightening where he stood. His hands fell to his sides, clenching into hard knots. He could feel the muscles in his arms bunching as he fought to get himself under control. Damn it, he just wanted to punch something.

Take this seriously! he wanted to scream. _They hurt Hinata! They attacked our gym! This is a serious threat!_

Maybe he didn't have to, though. The two police officers were looking at the graffiti with some interest in their eyes, now. One of them was speaking into his radio, while the other one—the one with the form and pen—was standing near Daichi, patting the air between them as if he would find that consoling. "Sawamura-kun, are you calmer now? Perhaps you should step away and take a moment to gather yourself."

Daichi looked at him with narrowed eyes for a moment, then nodded stiffly and turned away. He stalked to the edge of the parking lot and jammed his fists into his pockets, trying to control his breathing. His legs were trembling now, not with fear but with an almighty urge to _run, to go somewhere, to do something about this._

"Daichi, Daichi." It was Suga's voice, breathless, higher than usual. Daichi turned and saw Suga jogging toward him, his eyes wide and his hair in disarray. He'd had to pass by the gym to reach this part of the school campus—he must have seen what was going on.

"Suga." Daichi's shoulders relaxed and his hands slipped out of his pockets, open and loose. "Suga, I need you to help me sneak into the school office."

Suga's eyes narrowed. "Why?" The one-word response was drawn out in suspicion.

"I need to find Isao's address so I can go to his house and punch him. Several times. And then find out where his friends live so I can punch them, too."

Suga blinked at him a couple of times, then doubled over, laughing uproariously. "Daichi!" he wheezed out between bone-shattering guffaws. "Daichi! This is no time for joking!"

"I'm not joking," Daichi grumbled, rolling his eyes toward the heavens in a request for patience as Suga grabbed his arm to hold himself up.

"Don't make me laugh like this! This is a very serious time and we should be keeping our composure!" Suga was hanging off Daichi now, his knees buckling with the force of his hysterical laughter.

Daichi grunted and folded his arms over his chest, dragging Suga along, still clinging to his arm. He held himself in stillness while his vice-captain laughed himself out. He could feel the tension in his chest slowly uncoiling and bleeding away, as if Suga's mild freak-out was relieving them both.

"Suga—" he said eventually, when Suga had bubbled off into the hiccup-and-sigh stage. "Suga, are you done?"

"Yes, Daichi," Suga said as calmly as he could, though hysteria still lurked under his tone. "I'm done now."

"Perhaps, then, we should have a chat with the nice officers."

"That would be a good idea, I think, yes."

"Maybe you will be able to convince them to take this seriously. I don't think I was entirely successful in that pursuit."

Suga straightened up and faced Daichi, still holding his arm with one hand. "They seemed pretty serious when I arrived and asked them what had happened. Don't sell yourself short."

Daichi huffed out a breath. "It still might be a good idea for you to explain the situation, too. Adults always take you seriously."

"Of course, of course." Suga let go of his arm at last, patting the spot where he'd been holding on as if asking forgiveness of the flesh he had bruised with his grip. "Are you over your need to punch someone, now?"

Daichi thought about it. "Not entirely. I think I can hold off for a while, though."

Suga smiled. "That's probably the best we can ask for." He put his hand on Daichi's shoulder and nudged him toward the gym. "Let's go talk to the nice authority figures now. Oh, look! Take-chan is here! I'm sure he'll help, too. And then later we'll go visit Hinata and see how he's doing, and hopefully that will soothe away your need for punching."

Daichi nodded and let Suga lead the way. This day had been horrible so far, but maybe it was finally looking up.

7. Chapter 7

****A/N:**** My first time writing kitty interaction! It was fun. Please note that Kenma calls Kuroo by a childhood nickname, Kuro. I didn't forget how to spell partway through.

* * *

><p>"Good morning, Kenma-san!" It was Lev, of course. Cheerful, idiotic Lev. Kenma gave him a dull stare, then turned away as he dropped his bag on the floor of the club room.<p>

Lev didn't notice that Kenma didn't want to be spoken to. Lev never noticed. He bounced over like a mop-headed blond giraffe, as usual, leaning over and half-crowding into Kenma's space as Kenma slowly got ready for morning practice. "Did you have a good weekend, Kenma-san? I did! I went to the playground with my little sister and we swung on the swings and I pushed her up really high and she kept wanting me to push her higher because she thought maybe if she went high enough she'd be able to grab a cloud and it would taste like candy floss like at the festival last month and I told her she was silly but I still pushed her as high as I could!"

Kenma blinked, staring down at his hands. One was holding his jersey and the other one had his uniform shirt. Which one was he in the middle of putting on? He couldn't remember.

"Oi, Kenma-san!" Lev leaned in closer, though he refrained from poking Kenma's forehead, as he might have in earlier days. Yaku had

trained him out of that bad habit, at least. "Are you listening to me?"

"No." It was the same answer Kenma always gave to that question, but his voice was heavier than usual. He could feel it. He could feel the heaviness. There was a great weight in the middle of his body, below his lungs and above his stomach. It had made it very, very difficult to get up this morning, but he'd done it. He'd dragged himself out of bed and come to volleyball practice, and he was even on time. The others really shouldn't expect more out of him today.

He didn't expect Lev to notice the heaviness in his voice. Lev was happily oblivious to subtlety—it was the entirety of his personality. But Lev paused his sunny diatribe, hovering over Kenma in silence for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was unusually subdued. "Are you feeling all right, Kenma-san?"

"I'm fine." Kenma glanced up at him, then returned to his baffled contemplation of the shirts in his hands. "Please leave me alone."

Ah, the jersey. The jersey was the one he needed to put on. Kenma slipped it over his head and moved quietly out of the room. Lev followed him, also quietly for a change. Kenma saw no need to remark on it. Such a pleasant deviation from the norm should not be examined too closely, lest the noisy, obnoxious Lev should return.

Lev trotted at his side all the way into the gym. It was quite a trick, really, for such a long-limbed creature to trot and at the same time keep pace with the much smaller Kenma, who was trudging. Sometimes Lev could be a bit miraculous. Kenma contemplated the phenomenon for a moment, then decided it wasn't worth pursuing further and let the train of thought go.

"Kuroo-san!" Lev called once they emerged onto the shiny wooden floor of the gym. The sound of volleyballs striking the floor already echoed, Kai and Yamamoto warming up as others completed their stretches or jogged around the perimeter. Kuro was pushing a bin of volleyballs toward the net, and he paused and looked up at Lev's shout. "Kuroo-san, Kenma-san is sleepy today!"

Kenma was jolted out of his weariness enough to glare up at Lev. He just had to shout such an embarrassing revelation in front of the whole team, didn't he? Of course he did. This was Lev.

Kuro frowned, but no one else seemed to take notice. Lev jogged over to the captain while Kenma stood where he was a few meters into the gym, momentarily frozen. Kuro said something to Lev, who nodded and took over the bin. And Kuro moved toward Kenma, that long smooth stride of his, like a cat slinking along a fence. It was the way he moved when he was making plans in his head and trying to figure things out so he could change a situation to be in his or his team's favor. Kenma squinted at him, watching his approach. He didn't like it when Kuro moved like that while looking at him. It never bode well.

Kuro walked toward a corner of the gym, motioning for Kenma to follow him, and Kenma sighed and went. They might as well get it over with now, so they could get on with practice. Kuro wasn't going to let it go until he was satisfied.

"You know, I would usually ignore Lev when he thought he made some grand discovery," Kuro said once they were relatively alone. "But I think he was right to point this out to me. You look a lot more tired than usual. Did you stay up too late playing video games again?"

Kenma shook his head. He had stayed up too late, but not because of video games. He paused and blinked, then nodded. Well, it was true that he had been playing a game at the time, though it wasn't the reason for his sleeplessness.

Kuro folded his arms over his chest. "C'mon, you know you get sick when you don't get enough rest. You need to take care of yourself."

"I couldn't sleep. I played video games to keep myself occupied, that's all. Once I was tired enough to sleep, I did. It just took a while."

Kuro tilted his head, studying Kenma with a wrinkled forehead. "Why couldn't you sleep? Was something bothering you?"

Kenma nodded. Part of him wanted to tell Kuro everything, just blurt it out and get it away from his body, from that heavy place that was dragging him down. He couldn't seem to gather enough energy to overcome the inertia, though, to push the heavy weight strongly enough to make it move. It was too large, too overpowering, to settled in its place inside his gut.

"That's not like you." Kuro's voice had gone quiet. "You let most things roll off your mind like water over leaves. This must be something very heavy."

A lump rose in Kenma's throat. How did Kuro always see so clearly? Yes. It was heavy. So heavy that it weighed his mind and body down and forced him to use all his powers of distraction to push it away from his mind just for a little while, just for enough escape so that he could rest.

"Tell me," Kuro said, still quietly, but with an edge in his voice that was part captain's command, part childhood friend's request. Kenma had never been able to resist that tone. It was a good thing Kuro didn't use it that often, or Kenma would start to resent the manipulation.

Right now, though, it was good. It was the impetus he needed, that little bit of extra energy, a push to start the heavy stone moving away from him.

Still, Kenma angled his head down and to the side to look at a spot on the floor several paces away, unable to meet Kuro's eyes. "It's about Shouyou."

"Hinata Shouyou?" In the corner of his vision, Kuro straightened, his arms still folded across his chest. "You heard back from him, then?"

Kenma didn't remember telling Kuro that Shouyou hadn't been answering his texts. He wasn't surprised that he'd done it, though. It had been

bothering him last week. Kuro eventually figured out everything that was bothering him, one way or another.

"I got a text," Kenma said. "But it wasn't from Shouyou. It was from Kageyama."

"The Karasuno setter?"

Kenma nodded. "He texted me from Shouyou's phone. He was staying overnight at Shouyou's house."

"Why?"

The stone was rolling now, heavy and grating, leaving tracks behind in a deep, ragged groove. But it was moving, it was going, the words were coming out one answer at time. Maybe he could say it now. Maybe he could tell Kuro.

"Shouyouâ€¦ Someone hurt him. Someone at his school. Gave him a head injury. On purpose. A moderate concussion. He was in the hospital for two days, and then he couldn't use his phone. Kageyama was staying overnight to help out. I guess they must be friends."

Kuro was silent. Kenma looked into his face. He could see him thinking.

"I called the next morning. After Kageyama texted me. I talked to Shouyou. He sounded...mostly like himself. Mostly. But my talking became too much for him and Kageyama took over again."

Kuro met his eyes. "I understand why you couldn't sleep."

Kenma nodded. The heavy stone had rolled between them, leaving a gap in the middle of his body instead. He could hear the wind howling, feel the raw air cutting against the exposed nerves.

"They said Shouyou would be able to use his phone again soon," Kenma said. "But he hasn't texted me yet. I don't know how long it will be."

"I'm sure he'll contact you as soon as he can."

Kenma nodded. He stared at the floor.

Kuro touched his shoulder. "You want to see him."

Kenma's gaze flew to his face again. It wasn't surprise lighting him up inside. He'd already known that Kuro would be able to see what he wanted, even if Kenma said nothing. No, this bright illumination flowing through him was anticipation. Kuro would make it happen. Kenma didn't know how to make things like this happen, but somehow Kuro always did.

He didn't respond. Didn't even nod. But Kuro smiled his sideways, knowing smile at the look on Kenma's face. "Yeah, I thought so. We'll go next weekend. That will give your friend time to recover enough that our visit will be a pleasure instead of a burden."

Kenma closed his eyes in a slow blink and made an affirmative noise. It was all they needed. The wind was quieter. The gap was being

patched.

Kuro's hand slid off his shoulder. He looked to the center of the gym, where the rest of the team was already doing drills. "The others will want to know. Inuoka. Lev. We're all fond of Hinata."

"I don't want to tell them." Kenma shrank a bit when he heard the words leave his mouth. He didn't mean that he didn't want them to know. They deserved to know what had happened to Shouyou. He just didn't think he could find the words. It had been hard enough with Kuro, and he communicated more easily with Kuro than anyone else in the world.

Kuro nodded easily. "I'll do it."

Oh, right. Kuro knew what he meant. He always did. The shriek of the wind fell silent, though curls of air still circulated within him, cool and uncomfortable.

Kuro started walking into the middle of the gym, then looked back expectantly, waiting for Kenma to follow. After a moment, Kenma did, his stride solidifying with each step, slow at first, then more and more smooth and controlled. He was still tired, his mind still buzzing, his limbs still weighted with fatigue. But he knew now that he would be able to sleep tonight. He would have no need to exhaust himself with video games before he could rest.

After practice, he checked his phone and found a series of texts from Shouyou, all excited ramblings about his weekend with many, many exclamation points, and the last little gap in his gut filled in with hope. He no longer heard or felt the wind at all.

8. Chapter 8

Shouyou was asleep. His head was warm and heavy on Kenma's upper arm, and his unruly orange hair tickled his neck. Kenma glanced at him, then back to his screen. He was pretty sure there were a few more shells he could get on the beach in his Animal Crossing village, and he might as well hunt some bugs, too.

Shouyou's room was warm. The pile of blankets at Kenma's back were lumpy but comfortable. He didn't understand why Shouyou seemed to enjoy napping sprawled out over a dozen stuffed animals, though. Kenma blinked at the plush head peeking out from under Shouyou's body. Was that...a stegosaurus?

It didn't matter. Kenma wiggled his feet on the edge of the mattress, stretching out his calf muscles. He was comfortable, and so was Shouyou. Kuro and Kageyama were playing some board game in the next room over, close enough that Kenma could clearly hear Kageyama's groans of defeat and Kuro's gentle chuckles whenever something happened in the game. Sunlight shone in the window through the low-slung branches of a tree just outside, painting the floor and the bed with a pattern of intertwining shapes of crooked lines and leaves that shivered in an unfelt breeze.

Kenma was having trouble concentrating on his game. Not that Animal Crossing really required a great deal of concentration. But he was losing track of things, couldn't remember where he'd already gone and

what he'd already done. He struggled on for a minute or two, then admitted defeat and let his head fall back on the blankets behind him, the hand holding his 3DS falling limp at his side.

Shouyou snuffled in his sleep, and Kenma let his head roll to the side so he could look at him. From this angle he couldn't see his face, just the ruffled mop of his head and the angle of his back, curled on the bed. As he watched, Shouyou made a noise in his sleep and curled up tighter, his knees pulling up to his stomach, his head pushing harder into Kenma's arm.

Was he having a nightmare? Kenma's forehead wrinkled. He'd a nightmare or two himself, even though he'd done his best to exhaust himself every night so he wouldn't remember his dreams. He shouldn't have asked Kageyama to tell him the details of what had happened, he knew that nowâ€”too late.

The words over the phone in Kageyama's rough voice had been blunt, unsoftened by careful word choice or a gentle tone. Kenma hadn't been there, he didn't know even what the guy who had hurt Hinata looked like. But he couldn't stop imagining it, some tall, strong teenager grabbing Hinata's head and...and hurting him. Just like that. Because...he could? Was that what people like him thought? Was that how they were? Kenma couldn't fathom it.

Something must have happened. Recentlyâ€”yesterday or earlier today. Kenma had talked to Shouyou on the phone Thursday night, and he'd sounded almost like himself again, if a bit depressed at being forced to keep missing out on volleyball practices. Kenma knew he was still recovering, still needed rest and time to heal, but he'd let himself believe that the worst had passed. He'd thought that coming here today, seeing Shouyou with his own eyes, would just confirm that.

But the Shouyou who had met him at the station was...not quite right. He was cheerful and energetic and bubbling over with words and ideas and plans, just like always, but... It hadn't been right. Kenma had exchanged a glance with Kuro and had known that they both saw it. Something was off. And Kageyama-kun, the grumpy, stand-offish Karasuno setter, had watched Shouyou with brooding concern writ large on his face, too.

It was nice to learn that Shouyou and Kageyama were friends now, anyway. The sincere happiness in Shouyou's voice when he spoke about their new friendship was very heartening. Kenma was glad Shouyou had such a strong ally, both on and off the volleyball court. It made him feel much better about having to leave in just two days.

Kenma pushed the 3DS aside and reached into the pocket of his hoodie to retrieve his cell phone. He opened the text messages with a practiced flick and started a new one. _What did Kageyama tell you in the kitchen?_

He rested the phone on his lap and went back to staring at the top of Shouyou's head. After a moment, he heard the familiar ding of Kuro's cell phone in the next room. After a moment, Kuro called, "I'm right here, you know! You don't have to text me!"

Kenma frowned and tapped out another message. _Don't yell. Shouyou is sleeping. Just answer the question._

He looked at the fluffy head on his arm with some concern, but Shouyou didn't even twitch, still comfortably asleep. He might have curled up a little tighter, though. In the next room, Kuro's phone dinged, and Kuro grumbled, but didn't yell again. Kageyama said nothing, as he was much more well-mannered than Kuro had ever been.

Eventually, Kenma's phone made the noise he had set for his text alert ("Hey, listen!"), and he lifted the screen to his face to read Kuro's message. _The bastard who hurt Hinata has friends. They've been causing trouble. Yesterday they left a threatening note in Hinata's locker. It scared him badly. Kageyama is very worried, and he's not afraid to show it._

Kenma frowned even harder at this intelligence. He tapped out an acknowledgement, then put the phone back in his hoodie pocket. He tucked his hands in, too, as they suddenly felt clammy and cold. He let his head fall sideways so he could watch Shouyou's back, slowly moving up and down as he breathed. The sight was...soothing.

Kenma wasn't used to being angry. It breathed in his chest like fire, heating his face and igniting his brain. His throat felt dry and his stomach hurt. He just...didn't understand. Who would ever want to hurt Shouyou? It didn't make sense. It made the entire world feel darker and more dangerous, knowing that there were people out there who not only had hurt Shouyou in the past, but also were willing to do it again.

Kenma had been fortunate enough to avoid being bullied at school, his habit of sticking to the walls and making himself invisible serving him well in at least that one thing. Kuro had fought bullies a few times through the years, though, not for Kenma, but for himself and for a chubby classmate of his who hadn't been as successful as Kenma at disappearing into the crowd. The classmate had transferred soon after the last, worst incident, and Kenma didn't know where he was now. He wondered, suddenly, if he was okay, if he had gotten over the way he'd been treated, if he had friends at his new school.

Kenma spent a lot of time observing his peers, trying to anticipate their feelings and motivations so he could avoid negative attention. He thought he was pretty good at reading people, now, and he usually understood more or less why they acted the way they did. He still didn't understand bullies, though. Sometimes, to be sure, it was the outgrowth of stress or a bad environment, whether at home or at school. Those were understandable.

But some bullies were just... Some people were just born that way, and that was what Kenma didn't understand. It bothered him that he didn't understand it. Why did some people find pleasure in dominating and wounding others? It was so far removed from Kenma's experience of the world that he could barely even stand to think about it. It was too alien, too far away. It was easier to just stop thinking about such things, so that was what he did.

It had never made him angry before, though. He'd been frightened, unnerved, even disturbed by the existence of such cruelty. But he'd never been angered by it. He was annoyed by many things, creeped out by some, and frightened by a few. But this might have very well been the first time he felt true anger the way he'd heard it described in

stories and the words of others, and it was a strange and disconcerting experience.

Being angry was...exhausting. Kenma didn't like the way it filled his head with bright, bursting colors, drowning out his normal perception of the world. His hands clenched into fists inside his pockets, and his legs twitched and trembled with a baseless, unfocused urge to move, to go somewhere, to do something. Never in his life had Kenma ever wanted to punch someone. He'd never done it. He didn't know how. But right now, if that bastard or any of his friends were in reach, Kenma would fly at them without hesitation, and damn the consequences.

How dare they. How dare they hurt Shouyou. How dare they threaten him and frighten him and drive away the cheer in his smile, the glow in his eyes. They had no right. No one had the right.

But Kenma's anger had nowhere to go, no outlet to express itself. He rolled his head back and stared up at the ceiling, blowing out a long breath that seemed born of fire. Slowly, slowly, the unfamiliar rage began to subside. His hands unclenched and his legs stopped trembling. Kenma was left limp and exhausted, feeling empty and little sad.

Shouyou slept on beside him, dead to the world. Kenma watched him for another moment, his mind almost empty in the wake of the emotions that had shaken him. Then he blinked, slow and considering, and made a decision. He shifted his arm so that Shouyou's head rolled off, just a few inches into a dip in the blanket pile, and then Kenma wiggled down and rearranged himself so he could look into Shouyou's face.

From here he could watch his expression and see that it was truly clear and smooth, no trace of nightmare or memory. Shouyou looked peaceful, the fear that marked his waking moments banished by the kindly hand of slumber. Kenma's eyes drooped as he felt himself being drawn in by the peace. Shouyou looked so comfortable and cozy. Kenma wouldn't mind a nap, either.

His head nodded forward, his eyes slipping shut, and he felt his forehead bump gently into Shouyou's hair. It was warm and soft. He could hear each of Shouyou's breaths, slow and smooth and quiet.

Kenma burrowed deeper into the pile of blankets and let himself drift away. They could deal with everything later. For now, let them enjoy a few moments of warmth and comfort. It wasn't too much to ask, of that Kenma was sure.

* * *

><p>AN:** I headcanon Kenma as aromantic, because that's what I am and I identify with him very, very strongly. So, you are free to see this as shippy (as you are free to interpret anything I write anyway you like, of course), but that's not my intention here. I'm just channeling the weirdness I felt the first time I experienced true anger (a couple years ago) after a decade and a half of repressing my emotions just as hard as I could. It's a very disconcerting experience.

9. Chapter 9

A/N: Inspired by a comment by TaliaMamane. Your comments are very important!

* * *

><p>Ryuu was still in his room.<p>

Noya had come over to spend the evening, as he often did. He and Ryuu would sit in the main room and pretend that they were going to do homework together, though they nearly always just ended up listening to music and talking about volleyball and girls. Saeko-nee would bring home leftovers from the restaurant where she worked, or they'd make curry or order takeout, and it was always a good evening.

But tonight, Ryuu wouldn't come out of his room. Noya wandered in and out, too restless to be still. Occasionally he tried nudging Ryuu's back with his knee.

"C'mon, Ryuu, the food's getting cold," he'd say, or, "We should at least look at the math problems, shouldn't we?" or "I brought the new Volleyball Monthly, don't you want to see it? I'm not gonna give it to you unless you sit up."

But Ryuu remained on his bed, curled on his side with his back to the room so Noya couldn't see his face. "I'm tired, Noya-san," he said. It was all he said.

He certainly sounded tired. A deep and abiding weariness dragged at his voice, making it sound rough and low and much too old for his years. Noya wondered if Ryuu had gotten any sleep at all since Hinata's head hit the wall. He was beginning to suspect that he had not.

"You're tired, but you're not sleeping," Noya said reproachfully. "You're just lying there. C'mon, get up, I wanna eat curry."

"Then eat curry," Ryuu snapped. "Leave me alone. I don't want any."

Noya took a step back, blinking. He couldn't remember if Ryuu had ever used that tone of voice on him before. Or anyone. It was peevish and petulant and still so dead, dead tired. It was nothing at all like Ryuu. Ryuu got riled up and impatient and angry and frustrated and annoyed, but never quite like this. He never sounded like he hated anyone or anything. But this time... This time, he did.

Noya didn't take it personally. Ryuu could never hate him, and Noya knew that. It was just...this situation. This entire terrible, terrible situation.

Every bit of restless energy drained from Noya's limbs, instantly and in a rush. The breath blew out of his body in a silent sigh, deflating him, bringing him down to earth. He stopped swinging his arms. Stopped bouncing on his toes. He ached. He ached everywhere, but most of all in his hands, where Shouyou had gripped him tight, tight, tight, his fingers wrapped around Noya's palms as if he was drowning and only Noya could save him.

"Ryuu," he said, and his voice was quiet, too. "You gotta get out of bed."

"Don't wanna," Ryuu said, grunting with the effort of the words. His body moved with the force of it, a huff of air and sound almost buried and muffled in the bedding. Then he went still again, and the next word was almost too quiet to hear. "Can't."

"You got out of bed to visit Shouyou in the hospital this afternoon. You can get out of bed to eat curry."

"I'm not hungry, Noya-san. How many ways I gotta say it? I'm tired."

Noya fell silent. He tilted his head, studying his friend's still figure on the bed. He considered asking Saeko-nee for backup, but he was afraid that any exhortation from her would just make Ryuu even more stubborn and unwilling to move. The Tanaka siblings loved each other and they would fight all comers tooth and nail when threatened, but they also brought out the worst in each other, sometimes.

After a moment of consideration, Noya turned and sat down on the floor, leaning back against the side of Ryuu's bed. If he tilted his face far enough toward the ceiling, he could push Ryuu's back with the crown of his head. He didn't, though. He just sat facing the door, his friend behind him, his hands hanging loose in his lap.

"Are you going to go visit Shouyou tomorrow?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"You said you would, at the hospital. You seemed certain. Mrs. Hinata was really happy."

"I don't know if I'd be any good there. I don't think I would."

"Shouyou will be disappointed if you don't go."

Ryuu said nothing.

Noya laughed, suddenly, the sound forced out of him as if someone had punched his stomach. "Shouyou admires you a lot, you know?"

Ryuu said nothing.

"He calls me senpai, and he thinks I'm really cool. And I am cool, of course." Noya puffed himself up and pointed his thumb at his chest, his chin tilted upward in justified pride at his own coolness. Then he settled back, his hand falling into his lap again. "But he looks up to you in a different way. You're the senpai he needs right now, not me."

Ryuu said nothing. Noya was quiet, too. He didn't know what else to offer. He'd told the truth, and if that wasn't enough to move Ryuu, he didn't know what would be.

"Hinata thinks I'm cool," Ryuu said softly. "But that doesn't mean

it's true."

"Of course it's true. You're the coolest."

"I didn't do any good for him before. Why would it be any different now."

Noya felt like he'd been stabbed in the chest. Suddenly it made sense. It was all clear. This wasn't really about tomorrow. It was about the day before yesterday. It was about the moment Hinata's head hit the wall. The moment none of them had been able to predict and prevent, as much as they all longed for the ability to do so, to go back in time and stop it before it began.

Why hadn't it been a volleyball? A spike from an opposing ace? Noya could have stopped that. He could have received it the way he always did, with a wham and a whoosh and a pop, halting the momentum, the energy, taking it all into himself and reflecting just enough, just the right amount to send the ball sailing gently through the air to the setter.

It hadn't been a volleyball. It had been a thug. Noya hadn't been able to stop it anymore than anyone else had. He was a pretty shitty guardian deity, all things considered.

"Ryuu..."

Noya got up on his knees and twisted to look at his friend, but he couldn't bear the sight. Couldn't bear the sight of his best buddy all huddled into himself in a miserable ball, exhausted but unable to sleep, empty but unable to eat. "Ryuu..." He pressed his face into Ryuu's back for a moment and just held it there, unable to do anything else.

Ryuu breathed. Noya could feel it, the warmth, the movement. Gradually as he knelt there, pressing his face to Ryuu's strong, muscled back, he steadied. The ice melted from his limbs, from his brain and from his heart. Ryuu was breathing. He was alive and breathing.

So was Shouyou.

After what seemed like a long, long time, Noya withdrew. He was reluctant to leave that warm spot he found, the reassurance of feeling and hearing Ryuu's steady breaths. But he had to move away, just a little. Just enough to speak.

"Ryuu, this is something only you can do."

For a long moment, he thought Ryuu wasn't going to respond. Then the words came, slow and reluctant. "What do you mean?"

"You're suspended. You're free in the middle of the day. The rest of us have to go to school. Only you can watch out for Shouyou while the rest of us are shackled to academia."

"I told you I'm not going to be any good at it."

"Maybe not." Noya forced himself to say words he didn't believe at all. "Maybe you won't be much good, the way you think. But it'll be

something. Something is better than nothing. Shouyou would rather have you than no one."

He'd rather have you than anyone. That was closer to the truth.

Ryuu went still. Even his breathing seemed to stop as he considered this deeply. Noya held his breath, too, waiting, anticipating.

"Do you really think so?" Ryuu asked. There might have been a note of interest in his voice. Of hope.

Noya laughed, bright and sharp. The room was dark with the fading of the sun outside, since neither of them had bothered to turn on a lamp. But he felt light and free and sunny, even so. "I don't think. I know! Shouyou will want to see you. He will! You have to go."

Ryuu was silent for a moment longer. Then slowly, slowly, he started to push himself over onto his back, twisting his head around so he could look in Noya's face. "Better than nothing?"

Noya nodded, brisk and sure. "Better than nothing!" _Better than almost anything, idiot Ryuu. Maybe when this is over you'll be able to see that again._

"Okay." Ryuu stared at the ceiling for a while longer, then wearily began to shove himself upright. "Did you say there's curry?"

"Yeah, there's curry." Noya hopped to his feet, thrumming with energy. He grabbed Ryuu's bicep with both hands and hauled him up. "C'mon, you gotta have your strength so you can look out for Shouyou tomorrow."

Ryuu let himself be pushed to his feet, then led out the door. Noya tugged Ryuu's arm over his shoulder and pulled him bodily forward as if dragging a pack horse. The light in the hallway was on, so they didn't trip over anything as they made their way to the kitchen.

Saeko-nee stood at the counter, fussing over the dishes of curry and rice. Her eyes all but bled relief at the sight of them, but her voice was sharp. "Finally! It's going to get cold, you dumbasses."

Noya pushed Ryuu into a seat, then hustled over to help her carry the plates. They ate curry, too strong and spicy because Saeko had used too many sauce packets for not enough ingredients. And they laughed and they talked, and slowly, slowly the light returned to Ryuu's eyes.

It wasn't bright enough. Ryuu wasn't back to himself, not even close. But it was something. It was better than nothing.

Noya joked and chattered and gave his friend a thumb's up. The relief settled into his chest. Ryuu was gonna be okay. He had Noya looking out for him, after all.

Maybe he wasn't such a bad guardian deity, after all.

10. Chapter 10

"I want to get something for Hinata."

Yamaguchi was practically vibrating as he walked. He kept straying from Tsukishima's side for moments at a time to stare into shop windows or gaze into the distance. Tsukishima kept walking, never varying his pace, and eventually Yamaguchi would drift back to walk beside him. His hand clenched and unclenched around the strap of his school bag, holding it to his chest. And still he kept _looking around,_ and _fidgeting,_ and Tsukishima could all but hear him worrying. It was starting to get annoying.

Tsukishima sighed. "He doesn't need anything. Lots of people gave him presents, and none of them were useful. I'm sure they're just piled up in his room now, a nuisance and bother that he and his parents have to deal with. There's no need for you to add to the pile."

"They weren't all useless," Yamaguchi said. He was walking at Tsukishima's side again, for the moment, but his head kept swiveling around. "I'm sure he enjoyed the book you gave him. And we know he likes Stego-chan."

"Shut up about Stego-chan," Tsukishima muttered. He could feel the heat rising in his cheeks, but fortunately Yamaguchi hadn't seemed to notice, yet. This time.

"Sorry, Tsukki." The familiar words were soft and absent-minded. Yamaguchi was staring away again, this time at a sweets shop across the street. "But Hinata's coming back to school tomorrow, and I want to do something for him..."

"You don't need to," Tsukishima said again, even though he knew that Yamaguchi wasn't listening. Even though he knew that the words would mean nothing to him. Yamaguchi never listened when Tsukishima tried to warn him against wasting his energy and resources on useless things.

Thus it was now. Yamaguchi paused for a moment to look at Tsukishima. His eyes were big and his face was solemn, that stupid, stupid sincerity of his glowing in his expression, that openness, that honesty, that...that _vulnerability_ of his that always made Tsukishima want to growl and snarl and push Yamaguchi into a corner where he couldn't be touched, where he couldn't be hurt, where no one would ever be able to reach him with the harsh cruelty of the world and take all of that earnest innocence _away._

"I know I don't need to." Yamaguchi's voice was reasonable, almost flat. He was doing his best to respond to Tsukishima on his own terms, to make him see his point of view through a calm stating of facts. As if that would ever work, as if there was a logical argument to be made for desires and ambitions that were based entirely on emotion. "I want to. That's how giving someone a present works."

Tsukishima did growl a bit at this, but it was light and half-hearted, his lips pulling back from his teeth in more of a grimace than a snarl. "Fine. Buy Hinata a present, if that's what you want to do. I'm not going to stop you."

Yamaguchi beamed at this, as if he had won something. As if he had ever needed Tsukishima's approval for anything he wanted to do. "Okay!" He pointed to the sweets shop he'd been looking at earlier. "I'm going to buy a piece of cake to give him for his first lunch back at school. That will be nice, won't it? I'm sure he'll like it, and it won't clutter up his room at all."

Tsukishima sighed, his shoulders slumping. "Sure. That would be a fine present, if a present you must give."

Yamaguchi wrinkled his nose in pleasure at this, then looked both ways to make no cars were coming and hustled across the street. He looked surprised when Tsukishima followed him. "Oh! You don't have to come with me, if you don't want to."

"We're walking home together, aren't we? It's just a quick stop."

Yamaguchi nodded. He was already studying the slices of cake in the window, all but pressing his nose to the glass like an eager child. "Uwaah, they have a lot of different flavors. Look, there's strawberry! We should come back here sometime when you feel like having cake."

"Sure." Tsukishima hefted his bag up on his shoulder. He didn't feel like it today. He wondered, for a second, how Yamaguchi had known that without asking. Yamaguchi always seemed to know, and it had never before occurred to him to wonder how.

"What flavor do you think Hinata would like?" Yamaguchi's eyes were still scanning over the rows of cake.

"Chocolate." The response came instantly, no thought required.

Yamaguchi turned to blink at him. "You really think so?"

"He almost always picks chocolate when the senpai buy him ice cream."

Yamaguchi nodded slowly, then turned back to the window to beam at the chosen slice of cake. "You're really observant, Tsukki. I didn't realize you paid attention to that."

"I pay attention to lots of things. Not all of them are useful, I guess."

Yamaguchi laughed, bright and happy, and trotted into the shop. Tsukishima hurried along behind him, pulled in his wake like a balloon on a string. A slice of cake was a good present, really. It suited Yamaguchi, and it would please Hinata.

The diversion from their walk home was a little annoying, yeah. But it wasn't that bad.

11. Chapter 11

A sweet nonny prompted me with this on tumblr. Just mention Suga,

Daichi, and a nightmare, and watch my writer-brain COME ALIVE.

* * *

><p>It had been months. Everything was over. Hinata was playing in games again. Tanaka could move his shoulder with full range of motion and never showed even a twinge of pain, no matter how many times Suga asked him to rate his discomfort. Kageyama was starting to roll his eyes when Hinata did something silly instead of grabbing his shirt to make him be still so he couldn't hurt himself.<p>

The bruises were gone. The cut on Daichi's cheek had faded to a thin white line, and Suga usually couldn't see it even when he was looking for it. When he searched himself in the mirror, he saw the same face as always, no trace of the ordeal they had all suffered and survived. Even though sometimes he half-expected to see smudges of soot blackening his hair, to see the shadow of broken wings behind him on the wall. There was nothing. Everything was over.

Suga had been strong through the entire mess. Well, he'd had one tiny breakdown at the beginning, but that didn't count, and Daichi had pulled him out of it straight away. He had been the team's rock, caring, teaching, comforting his kouhai when they needed support. It was over. He was fine—he'd never been anything but fine.

So why had woken in the middle of the night, panting and desperate, his heart trying to pound its way out of his chest? The images in his head... These awful, awful images... It had been a dream, a nightmare, it must have been, but why now? Why months later, after everyone else was healed and strong?

Blood, brains, eyes broken and staring, empty... The images wouldn't go away why wouldn't they just go away he didn't want to see it he didn't... Hinata was fine, he was fine, it was just a nightmare, just a dream...

Suga bent over, his blankets bunched up in a swelter in his lap, and pressed both hands to his ribs, to his heart. He needed to breathe, he needed to accept it, the same way he had told Kageyama to deal with his flashbacks, the same way he had encouraged Tanaka to release the responsibility that did not belong to him... He needed to breathe. He just needed to breathe.

But he couldn't. The air jammed up in his throat, in his lungs, trapped by the convulsive beating of his heart, the frantic shaking of his body. He couldn't accept this, he couldn't...

"I'm safe," he whispered, forcing the words out through trembling lips. "I'm safe. Kageyama is safe. Hinata is...safe." He choked on the last, almost couldn't get it out.

The words he had given Kageyama, the talisman against the dark. Later Kageyama had told him much he had appreciated that, how he had found himself repeating those words over and over when the flashbacks started getting to him. How much it had meant to him that he'd been able to say those words and mean them, believe them with all his heart.

We're safe. Nothing will touch us again. Daichi said so.

Daichi said so. It was foolish, perhaps, for Suga and Kageyama to place this much faith in another teenage boy, the captain of their volleyball team but hardly a paragon of virtue and might. But it had worked for Kageyama, and it usually worked for Suga, too. _Daichi said so. Daichi said so._

More than that, Daichi had made it so. As displeased as Suga had been by that ridiculous ambush plan, he had to admit that it had worked. Daichi had pulled it off. He'd made the threat go away as firmly and decisively as it could have been done. Even Hinata's bruised and battered subconscious had been able to accept that he was safe, then, finally letting him rest without fear. Daichi said the team was safe, and he made sure that what he said was true.

"We're...safe," Suga choked out now. _It's all in the past. It's all in the past. The dream means nothing._ "Daichi...said so..."

It wasn't working. Repeating the words to himself was not enough. The images still wouldn't go away, the fear still wouldn't fade. The physical reaction in his body and the emotional response in his brain and his heart only seemed to gain in intensity.

He needed to hear Daichi's voice. Suga released his grip on his torso and turned toward his nightstand, reaching out fumble-fingered for the lamp. His clumsy, shaking hand found the switch and somehow managed to press it, and he blinked in the sudden light, squinting against the pain of it. His phone...his phone was on the other side of the lamp. Suga scooped it into his fist with a quivering sigh and turned over on his side, curling up with his back to the light and the phone clutched in front of his face.

It was easy to find Daichi's contact, even in his panicked state. If it had been a physical button, it would have been worn and faded from much use. Instead he just scrolled to the right name and touched the little green icon for the call, then continued to stare at the phone as it buzzed with the distant ring.

Please have your ringer on. Please pick up. Please don't be mad that I'm waking you up in the middle of the night. Please just pick up and let me hear your voice.

"Suga?" Daichi's voice was groggy and slurred. "Wha's goin' on?"

"Daichi," Suga whispered. The relief of hearing that voice, warm and familiar even through the impersonal distance of a cellphone, was so strong that it dizzied him. He had to close his eyes.

"Suga?" Daichi's voice was a little more alert this time. "You sound...weird. Are you okay? What happened?"

"Daichi..." And suddenly his throat opened and he could speak. "I had a dream and it was just a dream and I _know_ it was just a dream but I can't make myself believe that it's just a dream and I've been trying to do the techniques..."

"Suga..."

"...all the techniques I learned so long ago, the breathing and the stretching...well, I guess I haven't done the stretching because I

was shaking too hard to get out of bed, but the breathing and the mental exercises..."

"Suga-san..."

"...even the ones I taught myself, the words I gave Kageyama, 'Daichi said, Daichi said so,' it's always worked before but now it's not and I can't make it go away and I'm sorry I woke you up..."

"Sugawara..."

"...but the images are just so awful, the dream was so horrible, and I don't know why it's happening because it's been months..."

"Sugawara Koushi..."

"...and this is the first time I've had a problem, I was fine, I've been fine, but now I'm not and I hurt, Daichi, my chest hurts so bad..."

"Kou-chan."

That one finally brought him up short. Suga cut off with a gasp, as if he'd bumped into a wall. But it was no wall—it was Daichi, and his voice was as warm and solid and strong and durable as Daichi himself. Suga curled up tighter and pressed the phone to his face, trying to ignore the tears that leaked out of his eyes.

"Nee-san called me that," he whispered.

"I know." Daichi sounded awake now. His tone was soothing and kind. "I'm sorry. I know that name is only for her to use, but I had to stop you somehow."

"It's okay. I'm glad you did."

"Suga," Daichi said, and they were back on equal footing again. "Tell me about the dream. Get the images out of your head."

Suga laughed, stilted and damp. "It was stupid. It didn't have anything to do with anything. I don't know why I had it."

"It was probably the spicy curry you had for dinner," Daichi deadpanned. "Come on. Tell me anyway."

Suga was silent for a moment, but not in refusal. He was gathering the images and sorting through them, figuring out how to start. "Isao wasn't even there. It was...a car accident. Hinata was on his bike, and he got hit, and...there was nothing left. There was nothing left, Daichi. It was horrible."

Words were not enough to convey the utter terror and despair of those images, the darkness that had flooded through him, burying the light in folds of heavy ink. Suga didn't know how he would ever be able to share it, ever be able to get across just how unbearable it had been, how deeply upsetting and terrifying and horrifying.

Daichi seemed to understand, though. "I see why you were upset." The

words were simple, but a depth of feeling somehow crossed over the phone, anyway

Suga drew a shaky breath and went on. This part was even harder to describe. "And it didn't stop... The dream shifted, and it was you there, instead. Like...like the match when you ran into Tanaka..." Suga's voice was wavering again. He fought to keep it under control. "I'm glad I woke then. I don't want to imagine what might have happened after that."

"I'm glad, too." Daichi's voice was quiet. "That's too much for anyone, Suga. No wonder you couldn't do your techniques."

"Yeah." Suga sighed. His heart was slowing in his chest, and he was starting to feel clammy and uncomfortable in his sweat-damp bedding.

"I'm glad you called me. What can I do for you?"

"Tell me it was just a dream. Tell me everything is all right."

"It was just a dream," Daichi said at once. "Everything is all right. Isao is in jail. Hinata is safe. So are you, and Kageyama, and Tanaka, and everyone on the team. You got to punch one of Isao's buddies, and it was amazing. We're going to play volleyball with everyone at school tomorrow, and it's going to be great. Everything is all right."

"But what about bike accidents, Daichi? What do we do about that?"

"We'll buy Hinata one of those coloring books for kids with information about bike safety and make him go through it while we watch."

Suga laughed. It startled him, leaping out of his mouth in a sudden burst of joy. He clapped a hand over his mouth and looked at the wall, hoping he hadn't woken anyone.

"Also a bike helmet," Daichi said. "We should get him a bike helmet."

"He probably has one but never wears it."

"Then we'll _make him._" Daichi's voice was low and growling.

Suga laughed again, more softly and restrained this time. "Such a tough captain," he murmured.

"That's right. I am an _excellent_ captain."

"Yeah."

They fell silent for a moment, listening to each other breathe. Suga kicked off his uncomfortable blankets. He lay in the cool air and appreciated the steadiness of his heart, the ease of his breathing.

"Are you feeling better?" Daichi asked after a while.

"Some." Suga still wasn't sure he wanted to go back to sleep. What if the dream came again? He rolled over and stared at the light of his lamp until his eyes began to water.

"Do you want me to come over?"

"We have school in the morning."

"I don't care."

"You live half an hour away."

"I don't care."

"The team will think we're terrible leaders if we're both tired tomorrow."

"I don't care."

Suga huffed a laugh. "You have an answer for everything."

"Do you want me to come over or not? We can watch bad American movies and cook breakfast for your family before they wake up."

Suga hesitated. It would be selfish to say yes. Daichi should stay at home in his warm bed and get as much sleep as possible before he had to get up.

But this was Daichi. He could be selfish with Daichi.

"Yes. Please come over."

"On my way."

And that was all.

Suga fell asleep on Daichi's shoulder halfway through Transformers 3, and he didn't dream at all.

12. Chapter 12

Yachi imagined a lot of worst-case scenarios, but she had never imagined something like this.

Well, perhaps "imagine" wasn't the right word. Her brain just...took her there. Something would happen, and Yachi's mind would get stuck on something, and then her brain would rush away down a long spiral of horrifying events that ended in utter disaster. It wasn't like she sat and daydreamed about all the bad things that could happen in her life. Her brain just...took her on trips sometimes.

So perhaps it wasn't surprising that she'd never imagined something like this. This didn't follow from any preceding events. There was no build-up to it, no explanation. It had no logic. It didn't follow rules. It made no sense.

And Yachi's brain could not comprehend it at all.

She had been walking down the hallway, heading for volleyball

practice, when she spotted Hinata and his classmate walking ahead of her. Hinata was smiling and talking loudly, as usual, jumping around like a grasshopper in the sun. Yachi started to raise her hand, to call and hurry her steps so she could join them.

Then something strange happened. A group of older boys Yachi hadn't noticed moved forward, surrounding Hinata and hiding him from her sight. A terrible noise sounded in the air, and Hinata's voice stopped as if it had been cut off by a knife.

Somebody laughed.

No one Yachi knew. She was sure of it.

A black hole opened up in the middle of Yachi's gut, and time skipped forward. Now Tanaka was in the hallway, straining against Daichi's hold on his arms. He was yelling and crying, spittle flying from his mouths, tears falling down his cheeks. He was trying to get at an older boy, a boy with a bloody nose who had raised his hand to swipe at his face, smearing the blood around. The boy with the bloody nose was smiling. So were his friends.

Hinata was kneeling on the ground, half in and half out of the doorway that led outside. He was bent forward, as still as if he'd been paralyzed. Yachi couldn't see his head.

She heard Kageyama's voice on the walkway outside. She'd never heard his voice sound quite like this before. He sounded...scared. He sounded terrified.

Hinata's classmate had backed until she hit the side of the doorway. Now she leaned against it, her hands over her mouth, her eyes full of tears as she stared down at Hinata, kneeling on the ground. All around the girl was movement and chaos, but she was still, paralyzed and silent.

She needs to look away, Yachi thought. She didn't know why she thought it, but she knew it was true. _She needs to stop staring at Hinata._

Yachi's feet started moving, certain and firm. This was something she could. She didn't know what was going on, and she couldn't do anything about it. But this one thing, she could do.

No one was paying any attention to her. She slipped through the moving bodies, the volleyball players who suddenly filled the hallway and pushed back the boy with the bloody nose and his companions. She moved through them as if she was invisible, as if she was wearing dark green camouflage in the jungle to fool the wild animals. Then Yachi was at Hinata's classmate's side.

She wrapped her hands around her arm and tugged her away. "Hello, my name is Yachi Hitoka. You're Hinata's friend, right? What's your name? Will you come with me?"

The girl moved easily at Yachi's prompting, pliable in her hands. "I'm...Kimura...Chiyoko..." Tears were falling down her cheeks, silent, one by one.

Yachi dragged her away. She propped Kimura up against a wall on the

inside of the hallway, removed from the mess, and stood between her and the shouting, weeping boys. She said something, and Kimura said something back. They had a conversation. It might have been a conversation, anyway. Neither of them were paying attention to what they were saying. Later, Yachi couldn't remember any of the words she had used. It might have been complete nonsense. It might have been poetry. She would never know.

Her brain was too full to think about words. She'd caught a glimpse of Hinata as she pushed by him to get to Kimura. Hinata had been bent over, there on the concrete, Kageyama kneeling in front of him and reaching out as if he wanted to grab Hinata but was unable to finish the movement. Yachi had seen blood. Blood had been spattered on the ground beneath Hinata's head. Hinata was hurt. He was bleeding.

Eventually, Kimura reached out and nudged Yachi's arm. "I'm...going to go home now," she said.

Yachi blinked at her. It took her a few seconds to comprehend what Kimura had said. "Shouldn't you wait and talk to the adults? Tell them what happened, what you saw? I'm sure someone went to get the authorities. You should talk to them."

Kimura shook her head, slow and dazed. Her movements were jerky and confused, but she seemed certain. "I need to go home." Her voice was firm, too.

"I don't think you should go. You just saw something really bad... You need to be still and relax until you feel better."

"No. I need to go home." The tears started flowing again, quiet, endless. "I want to go home. Please."

Yachi faltered. Every instinct screamed at her that she should not let this girl wander off alone. She clearly wasn't in control of her faculties. What if she forgot the way home? What if she wandered down the wrong street and got mauled by wild cats in an alley? Or she could fall down an open manhole and end up in the sewer and have to live on garbage for the rest of her life and her only friends would be the mutant rats that lived down there and then how would she ever have a family? Her family would be full of _rat babies._

"Please, Yachi-san, let me go home."

Yachi felt like crying, too. Then a gentle hand landed on her shoulder, and she looked up to find Kiyoko standing there. Her face was milky pale and her eyes were wet, but she seemed strong and in control of herself. "Hitoka-chan, are you all right?"

Yachi nodded numbly. She looked at Kimura again. "Kimura-san wants to go home."

Kimura switched her attention to Kiyoko. The tears fell faster. "Please, let me go."

Kiyoko nodded quickly. She brushed her hair behind her ear and stepped forward, wrapping an arm around Kimura's shoulders. "I'll help you, all right? Don't go alone."

Kimura nodded. Yachi almost fainted in relief.

Kiyoko looked back at Yachi. "Will you be all right here?"

Yachi opened her mouth, then hesitated. Not really, no. Not at all. But someone needed to help Kimura. "I'll be fine. I'll look after the team."

Kiyoko smiled. "I know you will. I'll join you as soon as I can."

She walked with Kimura away down the hall, steering her so that she couldn't look back at the chaotic scene they were leaving behind. Yachi watched them go for a few moments, then set her jaw and turned around. She had to face what was going on. She had to do everything she could to help her friends, her teammates. They were her responsibility.

The situation had changed in the last few minutes. Kageyama and Hinata were sitting with their backs against the wall inside the hallway, Hinata leaning on Kageyama's shoulder, Kageyama's arm wrapped around Hinata's chest. Suga knelt next to Hinata on the floor, talking to him quietly and holding a folded handkerchief to his forehead.

Hinata...didn't look good. His face was far too pale, and he seemed sick and dizzy and almost completely out of it. Yachi couldn't bear to look at him for long, her eyes slipping away. She couldn't help him—Kageyama and Suga were already doing everything they could. She would just get in the way.

But Kageyama...he didn't look much better than Hinata. He was pale, too, his cheeks flushed as if he had a high fever. His face was set in misery and anger, and he was glaring across the hall at Bloody-Nose and his friends, who were being kept back by Asahi and most of the second-years. The thugs were still smiling amongst themselves as if it was all a big joke. It made Yachi feel sick.

"You," Kageyama barked, and Blood-Nose turned to look at him. Noya shoved at his chest with one fierce hand, keeping him still, and Bloody-Nose grinned, expectant.

"Why?" Kageyama asked. The single word was...so full of pain. Pain and rage and sadness and confusion and grief. Yachi's chest hurt to hear it. She stared at Kageyama, unable to look away.

Bloody-Nose said something. Yachi didn't listen to the words—she already knew that they didn't mean anything. They were cruel and mocking and worthless. Kageyama's face shut down instantly, and he looked away and glowered at the floor. His arm tightened around Hinata's chest, and Hinata's hands tightened their grip on Kageyama's arm.

Bloody-Nose laughed.

Heat rose in Yachi's chest and spread through her arms, making her hands tighten into fists. She had a strange feeling as if she were floating, but it wasn't happiness. It was pure, potent, incandescent indignation. How dare he laugh? How dare he?

She still couldn't understand what had happened with Hinata. Her brain could not grasp the concept. It was too large, too heavy, too fiery to handle. Her mind shied away from the understanding of it, because it was just too much for her right now. Soon it would all be clear, soon it would all settle in her mind, and she knew already that it was going to crack her heart in half. Soon, but not yet.

But she could grab this corner of the situation, as small and as silly as it was. She knew this: Her friends were upset, and this boy was laughing at them. He was amused by their pain—he was openly mocking them for being hurt and angry and sad. How could he? What kind of person could have that response to a thing like this?

Tanaka was still sobbing, loud and shameless, pouring himself all over the floor. It was heartbreaking to listen to and difficult to watch. Daichi had pulled him away down the hall, opposite from where Yachi stood, and he still had his arms wrapped around him. Tanaka wasn't fighting to get away anymore. He was just standing there, letting Daichi hold onto him while he cried.

Yachi couldn't do anything for Hinata and Kageyama. They were already at their limit. But maybe she could help Tanaka. She could try, anyway. She could stand next to him and pat his back and tell him it would be okay, even if it was a lie. Tanaka adored Kiyoko, and he saw Yachi as Kiyoko's apprentice, so maybe it would mean something to him.

To get there, though, she would have to walk by Bloody-Nose and his friends. At another time this might have been a problem, but Yachi was currently buzzing with indignation at all of them. It was fuel in her limbs and fire in her heart. There was no room in her for fear when she felt like this.

She set her shoulders and started walking, arms swinging aggressively. She kept her eyes trained on Tanaka and Daichi, determined not to look at those nasty boys. If she looked, she might get scared. She needed to keep this buoyant feeling of heat and pressure bearing her up. She needed to walk, she just needed to get there...

A foot thrust out into her path. Yachi glared at it. A quick glance up revealed what she already knew—it was Bloody-Nose. He was smirking. Did he think he was going to trip her? What a ridiculous notion. Yachi stared down again, watching the floor in front of her with grim determination. She wasn't going to trip.

The foot was still there, clad in only a thin indoor shoe. Yachi stalked toward it without pausing. Then she stepped on it, deliberately, as hard as she could. She ground her weight down on the offending foot, ignoring Bloody-Nose's yelp of surprise (and pain?) and continued on her journey to her friends.

Tanaka had watched the entire exchange, though Yachi wondered how well he was able to see it with his eyes streaming tears. Right after she was past that horrible foot, Yachi's indignation suddenly fled. All of the heat left her body in a rush, leaving her feeling light-headed with terror. What had she just done?

She gasped, too frightened to look back, and scurried the rest of the way to Tanaka and Daichi, where she ducked behind them to hide from the thugs. Why did she do that? What was she thinking? They were going to remember her forever and watch for her whenever she came to school and trip her when she wasn't looking and steal her lunch and put bugs in all her food and then how was she going to eat at school anymore? She really didn't like bugs! They were not delicacies, no matter what her grandma said.

"Stag...beetles..." she whimpered, clutching the back of Daichi's shirt for protection.

He looked over his shoulder to frown at her, but Tanaka was laughing. It was choked and harsh and quiet, but it was a real laugh. He reached around Daichi to pat her shoulder, rough and clumsy. His hand was shaking, but the gesture was genuine.

"I saw that," he said in a loud stage-whisper. "That was awesome, Yacchan. You're awesome."

"It was an accident," Yachi lied. She just straight-out lied, her voice thin and high. "I didn't mean to do it."

Yachi peeked around Daichi to watch the thugs with one eye. They weren't looking at her, their attention held by Asahi and Nishinoya. Maybe they hadn't noticed that she did it on purpose. Maybe everything was okay. Even if it wasn't, at least she was with Daichi and Tanaka now. They were the most reassuring people on the team to be with if a fight was on the way.

Tanaka was still snickering. He had lowered his head to rest on Daichi's shoulder, soaking the fabric of his shirt with tears and snot. Daichi made a noise that might have been disgust and might have been satisfaction—or maybe both—and began to loosen his grip on Tanaka.

"All right now?" he asked gruffly. "You won't try to punch him again?"

Tanaka shook his head. He was still shaking all over, and tears were still leaking out of his eyes. Daichi shuffled sideways so they stood side by side, Yachi still clinging to his shirt. He kept one arm around Tanaka's back, and he didn't try to dislodge his head from his shoulder. If anything, he did everything he could to make sure Tanaka could leave it there for as long as he wanted.

Yachi let go of Daichi's shirt with one hand so she could pat Tanaka's back, as had been her original goal. Her hand was shaking, too, but she knew Tanaka appreciated it. "Everything's going to be okay," she said. That might be a lie, too, but she wanted it to be true.

Tanaka nodded. After another long few moments, he lifted his head from Daichi's shoulder and gave her smile. "Of course it will," he said, and his voice was brave and sure. "We're Karasuno. We'll take care of everything."

"That's right, we will," Daichi growled.

There was something low and dark in his voice, something not quite

fitting for a teenager, a high school boy, even one who was a captain of a sports team. Yachi did her best to ignore this. Everyone was upset. They were all saying and doing things they didn't quite mean.

Tanaka nodded calmly, though, as if he expected nothing less. He swiped a hand over his face, wiping away most of the tears and other fluids, and rubbed his hand on his shirt. Yachi stared at his hand, then let go of Daichi's shirt and moved around to his side so she could see it better. His knuckles were messed up, all red and swollen-looking.

Tanaka started to raise his hand back to his face, but Yachi caught it and held it in both of hers, staring at his knuckles. Tanaka started in surprise but didn't try to pull his hand away from her. Instead, he just watched her silently while Yachi frowned, trying to understand.

Then she put it together, all at once and in a rush, and she blinked. Tanaka had punched the boy with the bloody nose. He'd hit him. He'd used violence against another human being.

Good.

Yachi looked up in Tanaka's face, and he looked back at her. His face was pale, and grim, and still streaked and blotchy from crying. Yachi continued to hold his hand just as gently as she could.

"Everything will be okay," she said.

Tanaka nodded. On the other side of him, so did Daichi.

The three of them stood there, understanding. They held on to each other, and they waited. They had done all they could do, and in the future, they would do much more.

End
file.